

Mistaking Eugenics for Social Darwinism: Why Eugenics Is Missing from the History of American Economics

Thomas Leonard

American economics came of age as an expert policy science during the Progressive Era (roughly 1890–1920), which was also the high-water mark of biological approaches to social and economic problems. Eugenic and other biological thought deeply influenced American economics and the other newly professionalizing social sciences, especially sociology and psychology. The roster of anglophone economists (and other social scientists) who embraced eugenic ideas and policies is impressive, in both its breadth and its ideological diversity.

The progressive social scientists, those who led the Progressive Era movement for labor reform, were especially attracted to eugenic ideas. Scholars like Irving Fisher, Francis Amasa Walker, Henry Rogers Seager, Edward Alsworth Ross, John R. Commons, Sidney Webb, Charles Richmond Henderson, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and journalists like Paul Kellogg of the *Survey* and the *New Republic's* Herbert Croly all invoked eugenic ideas, especially to justify the exclusionary labor and immigration legislation that is a central legacy of the Progressive Era.

I make the case that eugenic thought influenced the reform ideas and legislation of the Progressive Era in Leonard 2003a and Leonard 2005. The present essay is historiographical in emphasis. It asks, if eugenic thought influenced reform economics and legislation of the Progressive

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Era, why has that influence gone largely unremarked? Why is eugenics more or less missing from the history of American economics?

This is a complex and unavoidably controversial question, so the first four sections provide some historical context. In section 5, I try to unpack the complexities of Progressive Era biological thought to argue that eugenics has been misplaced and thus overlooked. In particular, I criticize an influential historiographical tradition that treats eugenics as a mere continuation of Gilded Age social Darwinism, and that treats social Darwinism as a kind of synecdoche for what, in retrospect, progressivism is seen to oppose: individualism, laissez-faire economics, imperialism, racism, and militarism.

1. The Progressive Era and American Economics

American economics became a professional policy discipline during the Progressive Era—so called for its reform spirit and for its reform legislation—an era that begins a vastly more expansive state relationship to the economy. By the First World War, the U.S. government had created the Federal Reserve, amended the Constitution to institute a personal income tax, established the Federal Trade Commission, applied existing antitrust laws to industrial combinations and to labor unions, restricted immigration, regulated food and drug safety, and supervised railroad rates.¹ State governments regulated working conditions, banned child labor, capped working hours, and set minimum wages. By the 1910s more than forty states had instituted inheritance taxes. Local governments municipalized gas and water companies. Professional economists, especially the progressives among them, played a leading role in the Progressive Era transformation of the state's relationship to the American economy.

Less well known is the influence on that transformation of a biologically based movement for social and economic reform—eugenics. Progressive Era economics, like the regulatory state it helped found, came of age at a time when biological approaches to social and economic reform were at (or near) their apex.

1. U.S. efforts to tax wealthy and high-income persons predate the passage of the Sixteenth Amendment in 1913. A temporary federal inheritance tax was passed to finance the Spanish-American War, and, in 1894, Congress passed legislation, later ruled unconstitutional, taxing (at 2 percent) all annual incomes above \$4,000. By 1906 President Roosevelt was agitating for a federal personal income tax.

In justifying labor legislation, progressive economists joined eugenic thought to their theories of wage determination to argue that the superior, deserving poor could be uplifted only by removing from the labor force groups deemed biologically unfit—groups they called “unemployables.” Blacks, immigrants, and those defective in character or intellect were regarded by progressives active in labor legislation less as victims of industrial capitalism than as threats to the health and well-being of the worthy poor and of society more generally. Progressive Era reform economics ultimately argued that eugenic treatment of the biologically unfit—the so-called industrial residuum—was necessary to uplift the worthy poor (Leonard 2003a). Many reformers also included women in the class of “unemployables,” if for somewhat different reasons (Leonard 2005).

2. The Influence of Eugenic Thought

It is hard to overestimate the influence of Darwinian and eugenic ideas in the Progressive Era. I believe one cannot fully understand the economic ideas that underwrote labor and immigration reform without also understanding the biological thought that crucially informed them. If the relationship between American labor reform and the biology of human inheritance seems to the modern reader unexpected, it is, in part, because eugenics, new scholarship notwithstanding, is still widely misunderstood—regarded as an aberrant, pseudoscientific, laissez-faire doctrine, a kind of twentieth-century successor to Gilded Age social Darwinism that was wholly abandoned after the eugenic atrocities of German National Socialism. In short, eugenics was everything the progressives are seen to have opposed.

But the progressives were not that progressive, and eugenics was, in actual fact, the broadest of churches. Eugenics was not aberrant; it was not seen as a pseudoscience; it was not laissez-faire; it rejected social Darwinism; and it was not abandoned after Nazi atrocities. Eugenics was mainstream; it was popular to the point of faddishness;² it was supported by leading figures in the still-emerging science of genetics;³ it appealed

2. Eugenic ideas were faddish enough to become a staple at country fairs, where “fitter family” competitions were held and even made their way into the funny pages. See this Buster Brown cartoon, from circa 1903: www.geneseo.edu/~easton/humanities/busterbrown.html.

3. Diane Paul and Hamish Spencer (1995, 302) argue that, before the 1930s, Thomas Hunt Morgan was the only Mendelian geneticist to reject the eugenicist idea that socially undesirable traits were the product of bad heredity.

to an extraordinary range of political ideologies, not least to the progressives; it was—as state control of human breeding—a program that no proponent of laissez-faire could consistently endorse; and it survived the Nazis.⁴

Histories of eugenics traditionally have focused upon movements in the United States, the United Kingdom, and in Third Reich Germany; but we now know that eugenic thought was commonplace elsewhere, influencing scholars, writers, scientists, and policymakers in virtually all non-Catholic Western countries and in many others besides: there are scholarly treatments of the eugenics movements in Canada, France, Japan, Russia, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Romania, China, Latin America, and elsewhere.⁵ By 1933, the American demographer and eugenicist Paul Popenoe could boast that eugenic sterilization laws obtained in jurisdictions comprising 150 million people (Kevles 1995, 115).⁶

Eugenic thought not only crossed national borders; it also crossed political ideologies, traversing an extraordinary range of political views. Ideologically, the eugenics movement could attract reactionaries, such as Madison Grant, author of *The Passing of the Great Race*. But eugenics also won proponents of a quite different politics, including Margaret Sanger, the birth control advocate who began intellectual life as a radical anarchist (a protégée of Emma Goldman's); national socialists such as Karl Pearson, Sidney Webb, and George Bernard Shaw; social conservatives such as Francis Galton, founder of modern eugenics, and Charles Davenport, head of the Eugenics Record Office at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory; and the sui generis feminist and economist Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Writing a monograph-length survey of eugenics for the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, James A. Field (1911, 1–2) opined that

4. Sweden, for example, greatly expanded its eugenic sterilizations during the Second World War. More than sixty thousand Swedes, over 90 percent of them women, were sterilized from 1941 to 1975 (Broberg and Tydén 1996, 109–10). The other Scandinavian countries also expanded eugenic sterilization programs after the Second World War, as part of what the historian Daniel Kevles (1999, 437) calls “the scientifically oriented planning of the new welfare state.”

5. On Canada, see McLaren 1990; France, Schneider 1990; Japan, Suzuki 1975; Russia, Adams 1990; Scandinavian countries, Broberg and Roll-Hansen 1996; Romania, Bucur 2002; Latin America, Stepan 1991; China, Dikötter 1992.

6. Eugenic sentiments can even be found among scholars from traditionally black colleges. Kelly Miller (1917) worried about the lower fertility of the Howard University professoriate—“the higher element of the negro race”—when compared with the average African American. See also Hasian 1996.

“eugenics is [one of the most] hopeful application[s] of science in social reform.”

Biological justifications for social and economic reform naturally appealed to those, such as Irving Fisher, a founder of the American Eugenics Society, who served as officers in eugenic organizations. One is not surprised to find leading eugenicists proselytizing, as when Karl Pearson ([1887] 1901, 307–8) suggested that “Socialists have to inculcate that spirit which would give offenders against the State short shrift and the nearest lamp-post,” or when Sidney Webb (1907, 17) devised a novel term, “adverse selection,” to describe what he saw as English “race suicide,” a Progressive Era term of art for the process by which the unfit outbreed their biological betters: “Twenty-five percent of our parents, as Professor Karl Pearson keeps warning us, is producing 50 percent of the next generation. This can hardly result in anything but national deterioration; or, as an alternative, in this country gradually falling to the Irish and the Jews.” But the influence of eugenic ideas extended well beyond the organizations dedicated to eugenic research and proselytizing.⁷

Justices Louis Brandeis and William Howard Taft joined the infamous *Buck v. Bell* Supreme Court decision, where Oliver Wendell Holmes, a proponent of eugenics, opined that “the principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes.” “Three generations of imbeciles,” they agreed, “is enough.”⁸ President Theodore Roosevelt (1907, 550) called race suicide—“the elimination instead of the survival of the fittest”—the “greatest problem of civilization,” and he regularly returned to the theme.⁹ President Calvin Coolidge, in 1921, warned of the perils of race mixing: “Biological laws tell us that certain divergent people will not mix or blend. The Nordics propagate themselves successfully. With other races, the outcome shows deterioration on both sides. Quality of mind and body suggests that observance of ethnic law is as great a necessity to a nation as immigration law” (14). Coolidge said, “America must remain American” when he signed the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, which imposed racial quotas advocated by Irving Fisher and which radically curtailed immigration from eastern and southern Europe.

7. I owe to Dan Rodgers this distinction between the professional eugenicists, who founded and staffed the eugenics organizations, and the vastly larger number of scholars, writers, and policymakers influenced by eugenic ideas.

8. *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200, 208 (1927).

9. For the leading role of economists in promoting race-suicide arguments in the context of immigration, see Leonard 2003a, 714–21.

The intellectual influence of eugenics extended well beyond the public sphere.¹⁰ Virginia Woolf confided to her diary that “imbeciles” “should certainly be killed.” T. S. Eliot favorably reviewed eugenic articles from journals such as *Eugenics Review*. In 1908 D. H. Lawrence indulged in an extermination fantasy:

If I had my way, I would build a lethal chamber as big as the Crystal Palace, with a military band playing softly, and a Cinematograph working brightly, and then I'd go out in back streets and main streets and bring them all in, all the sick, the halt, and the maimed; I would lead them gently, and they would smile at me. (cited in Childs 2001, 10)

Not all proposed eugenic remedies were as extreme as lethal chambers or compulsory sterilization for the unfit. But few disagreed with the diagnosis—that some races (and other groups) were biologically inferior, and these unfit races (and other groups) were the root cause of social and economic problems. And few opposed the eugenic prescription—that the state can and should plan human breeding so as to reduce the proportion of the unfit.

Thus does the new scholarship in the history of eugenics now adopt a broader perspective on eugenics, understanding it as “a biologically based movement for social reform” (Schneider 1990, 4), one that eventually “belonged to the political vocabulary of virtually every significant modernizing force between the two world wars” (Dikötter 1998, 467). Seen this way, it is perhaps less surprising that the fledgling economists who blueprinted and began erecting the key structural elements of what would become the American welfare state, readily made recourse to biological explanations of economic problems.

3. Who Were the Progressives?

Progressive Era historiography employs a sometimes bewildering variety of labels to describe the Left-liberal social theorists and reformers who promoted the idea that an activist state, as guided by social-scientific expertise, should reform markets in the name of advancing a social welfarist vision of the common good (Fried 1998, ix). The diverse

10. I owe the following examples to Donald Childs's (2001) fascinating volume, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration*.

terminology among historians reflects, in part, the scope and heterogeneity of American reform movements in the Progressive Era: nativists, Social Gospelers, temperance advocates, muckrakers, birth-control advocates, eugenicists, charity reformers, settlement house workers, pacifists, good-government advocates, city-beautiful advocates, and conservationists.

I adopt the old-fashioned term *progressive* (with a lowercase *p*), in recognition of the reformers' (rare) agreement on the cause of labor reform through legislation and their shared belief in what Linda Gordon (1992, 36) calls the "progressive traditions of statism and . . . expertise." Labor reform was the very heart of the progressive agenda, as was the belief in the virtues of an expert technocratic vanguard to justify and to promote the labor-reform agenda.

Perhaps no group better embodied this progressive ethos than American reform economists. The reform economists' impulses to set the world to rights were powered by a potent combination—the German academic social activism they had admired as graduate students and the Protestant Social Gospel's evangelical will to remake society.

When, soon after its founding, the reform-minded American Economic Association (AEA) transformed itself from an agency of Christian social reform into a more scholarly and scientific professional organization (Coats 1960), the progressive economists' creed of activism through expertise—what Mary Furner (1975) calls "advocacy"—did not disappear; it relocated. Perhaps wiser after the academic-freedom trials at the end of the nineteenth century, the progressive economists founded organizations outside universities to conduct research on the labor problem and to lobby, advocate, and rake muck.

Academic economists traded not just on the relatively newfound authority of their professorial chairs but also on the specialized knowledge they could offer to those writing reform legislation. As Daniel Rodgers (1998, 108) puts it: "Expert policy counsel, in fact, turned out to be the ground on which laissez-faire's professional critics regrouped and refashioned a position of influence. . . . [they] established new forms of authority by colonizing the social space between university professorships and expert government service." In the United States, Progressive Era reformer economists essentially invented a role we today take for granted, the academic expert who advises policymaking bodies.

Two of the most influential reform organizations were the American Association for Labor Legislation (AALL) and the National Consumers'

League (NCL). Ann Shola Orloff and Theda Skocpol (1984, 726) call the AALL the “leading association of U.S. social reform advocates in the Progressive Era.” Mostly forgotten today, the AALL was a key labor-reform advocacy group, influential in effecting Progressive Era legislation regulating workplace safety, minimum wages, and maximum hours.

The AALL was founded in December 1905 at the Baltimore AEA meetings, principally by two of Gustav Schmoller’s students, Henry Farnam of Yale and Adna F. Weber of the New York Bureau of Labor Statistics (Rodgers 1998, 236).¹¹ The first group meeting was in early 1906. Richard T. Ely was the AALL’s first president, and John R. Commons was its first executive secretary. The latter position was soon taken over by Commons’s protégé John B. Andrews, who led the organization for many years, overseeing its transformation from scholarly muckraking shop to politically powerful pressure group. Irene Osgood (who became Irene Osgood Andrews), another Commons disciple, served as the AALL’s assistant secretary.

Henry Rogers Seager was involved from the very beginning, serving as the third and fifth president (Commons was the second). Princeton’s William Willoughby was the fourth president, and Irving Fisher served as the sixth AALL president. The AALL masthead practically mapped the interlocking directorates of American progressivism: Jane Addams of Hull House; Charles Richmond Henderson, a sociologist at the University of Chicago and head of Charities and Corrections; Paul Kellogg, editor of the *Survey*, an influential progressive organ; Louis Brandeis, AALL legal counsel until appointed to the Supreme Court by Woodrow Wilson; and Wilson himself, even after he became president of the United States.¹²

11. Henry Farnam, the Yale economist who cofounded and personally funded the AALL, was an early adopter of eugenic ideas. He argued in 1888 that “every effort . . . to remove what Malthus called the ‘positive checks’ to populations, without at the same time increasing the preventative checks, must result in an increase of the very classes which are least able to take care of themselves, and render more and more imperative the solution of that exceedingly difficult problem which Mr. Arnold White calls ‘sterilization of the unfit’” (295). “We are,” said Farnam, “by means of our very improvements, setting forces in operation which tend to multiply the unfit” (295).

12. Many other AALL leaders were progressive economists active in labor reform: Father John Ryan, author of *A Living Wage*; Matthew B. Hammond; Royal Meeker (appointed by Wilson to be commissioner of the Department of Labor). Elizabeth Glendower Evans, Massachusetts minimum wager and a friend of Louis and Alice Brandeis, was affiliated with the AALL. The AALL also attracted some academic economists less obviously reformers, such as Harvard’s Frank Taussig. In later years, institutionalists such as Wesley Clair Mitchell, Leo Wolman, and Walton Hamilton were members of the AALL General Administrative Council.

The NCL, led by the indomitable Florence Kelley, was less academic, was run by women, and was more skillful politically (Rogers 1998, 236). Josephine Goldmark, sister-in-law to Brandeis, was active in the NCL leadership and supervised the production of the Brandeis Brief, an annotated compilation of social science reports defending maximum-hours (and in later versions, minimum-wage) legislation for women. The NCL assembled local consumer leagues that, before embracing legislation, emphasized moral suasion: raising the consciousness of genteel consumers of ladies garments produced under sweatshop conditions, using NCL labels to certify satisfactory working conditions. Alice Goldmark Brandeis was an active member of the NCL and secretly paid the expenses of the Washington NCL office (Bary 1972).

The NCL tapped progressive economists for advisers and board members. Commons served as NCL president from 1923 to 1935. Seager, A. B. Wolfe of Oberlin College, and Arthur Holcombe of Harvard were members of the NCL minimum-wage committee as early as 1909 (Hart 1994, 209 n. 94). Ely and Father John Ryan of Catholic University were also active NCL advisers.

No single entity can stand in for the heterogeneous and fractious reform groups that have, at one time or another, acquired the label of “progressive.” But, in the realm of labor reform, the AALL economists and their (sometime) allies of the NCL make for excellent exemplars, because of their impeccable reform credentials, their preference for expert statutory reforms over collective bargaining, and their abiding faith in social science, the state, and their own disinterested expertise as reliable guides to the social good.

4. What Drew the Progressives to Eugenics?

Eugenic ideas, which date to Plato’s *Republic* at least, were not new in the Progressive Era, but they acquired new impetus with the era’s advent of a more expansive state relationship to American society. The modern incarnation of eugenic thought, conventionally dated to Francis Galton’s first eugenics publications in the mid-1860s, was essentially ignored for a generation. When in 1868 W. R. Greg (1868, 361), an economics writer and influential early popularizer of eugenics in England, proposed a society in which “paternity should be the right and function exclusively of the élite of the nation,” he understood that the prospect was remote in time. Eugenics’ moment comes only toward the end of Galton’s long life,

when the new expansion of state power meant that it was now possible to have not only eugenic thought but also eugenic practice. Eugenic legislation, says the eugenics historian Diane Paul (1995, 6), had to await “the rise of the welfare state.”

What drew progressives to eugenics was the same set of intellectual commitments that drew them to labor and other reform legislation. “For progressive reformers,” the historian of eugenics Daniel Kevles (1998, 211) writes, “eugenics was a branch of the drive for social perfection that many reformers of the day thought might be achieved through the deployment of science to good social ends.”¹³ Just as labor and goods markets could no longer be left unregulated, so too must the state take over from “nature” the project of selecting the fittest human beings. Irving Fisher (1907, 20) captured this expansive view of social control when he said: “The world consists of two classes—the educated and the ignorant—and it is essential for progress that the former should be allowed to dominate the latter. . . . once we admit that it is proper for the instructed classes to give tuition to the uninstructed, we begin to see an almost boundless vista for possible human betterment.” The progressive intellectual commitments were to the following:

1. the explanatory power of scientific (especially statistical) social inquiry to get at the root causes of social and economic problems;
2. the legitimacy of social control, which derives from an organic conception of society as prior to and greater than the sum of its constituent individuals;
3. the efficacy of social control via expert scientific management of public administration, where
4. expertise is both sufficient and necessary for the task of wise public administration.

Progressives believed deeply in the power of social scientific inquiry. Late Victorian scientists, like Galton, already regarded science (especially the science of society) as a high, even spiritual, calling. In the Progressive Era, especially in the United States, progressive economists and other reformers regarded science as a means for understanding social

13. This is not to suggest that the progressives were utopian; they were not. It is the case, though, that some utopian communities practiced eugenics as part of their philosophy of living. John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida community is an interesting example of social control of human breeding, where “social control” is not equivalent to “state control” (see Karp 1982).

and economic problems, and also as a policy method—via scientific management of public administration—for setting the world to rights.¹⁴

By “scientific” the progressives meant, roughly, “statistical” in the sense of observation, measurement, tabulation, and, even by the standards of the day, some very rudimentary kinds of inference. As with scientific racism or any system that assumes a human biological hierarchy, eugenics required measurement. A hierarchy presupposes that racial or other human types are distinguishable and, if the hierarchy is to be stable, also generally requires a fixity of racial types across generations.¹⁵ It is no accident that the notable proponents of human hierarchy in economics (and in social science more generally) were pioneering statisticians whose social science was founded upon measurement. Galton, Pearson, Francis Amasa Walker, Richmond Mayo-Smith, Irving Fisher, Jeremiah Jenks, and Walter Wilcox were all statisticians—by training and or by inclination. They regarded statistical measurement and inference as the method that put the “science” in social science.

The first two of Pearson’s (1909, 19–20) “bricks for the foundations of [eugenics]” were announced as follows: “[First] we depart from the old sociology, in that we desert verbal discussion for statistical facts, and [second] we apply new methods of statistics which form practically a new calculus.” American progressives regarded statistics as the scientific foundation for legislative reforms. Said the reformer Lester F. Ward (1915, 46): “If laws of social events could be statistically formulated, they could be used for scientific lawmaking.”

The progressives also believed strongly in the legitimacy of social control, a catchphrase of Progressive Era reformers, as it was for their

14. The reformers who founded the AEA and later the AALL were empirically minded, and a key selling point of the new reform economics they advocated was its methodological opposition to what they regarded as the excessively abstract, deductive approach of late classical political economy. See Barber 1987.

15. The putative fixity of racial types, most commonly measured by the “cephalic index”—the ratio of skull length to width—was a key concern of eugenicists. Working for the economist Jeremiah Jenks, who headed President Roosevelt’s 1907 U.S. Immigration Commission, the pioneering physical anthropologist Franz Boas took biometric measurements of thousands of European immigrants and their American-born and foreign-born children. Boas found the American-born children differed significantly from their immigrant parents and their foreign-born siblings in cephalic index and in other biometric measures, and that the measured differences between the immigrants and their foreign-born children were less than those between the immigrants and their American-born children. Boas concluded that there was no racial fixity but rather “a great plasticity of human type” and that the environmental advantages of the United States explained the greater change among American-born children of immigrants. See Chase 1977.

successors, the institutionalists. “Social control” did not refer narrowly to state regulation of markets. Edward A. Ross (1901), who popularized the term, employed it in a broader, sociological sense, to describe the various ways in which society “can mold the individual to the necessity of the group,” which, in the context of eugenics, meant a “program for survival” of the Anglo-Saxon race (cited in Furner 1975, 309).

The legitimacy of social control meant, in practice, the legitimacy of state control. Ward, who coined many neologisms, devised the term *sociocracy* to describe the “scientific control of the social forces by the collective mind of society” (cited in Fine 1956, 263). For progressives, the legitimacy of state control derived from an illiberal and organic conception of the state as an entity prior to and greater than the sum of its constituent individuals. Progressives, who criticized excessive individualism, ordinarily opposed the liberal tradition, which treated the individual as prior to the state and which saw the state’s legitimacy as deriving solely from the contractual consent of its creators. Washington Gladden, a leading Social Gospeler and ally of Richard T. Ely, argued that “the idea of the liberty of the individual is not a sound basis for a democratic government.” The liberal emphasis on individual freedom, Gladden argued, was “a radical defect in the thinking of the average American” (cited in McGerr 2003, 217).

The progressives’ somewhat antidemocratic impulses also informed their views of how reform should be devised and implemented. They believed that academic experts were both sufficient and necessary for the task of wise public administration. Experts were sufficient, because they could and would suspend their own interests to circumvent (or better, transcend) the messy business of interest-group machine politics. As one widely read eugenics text put it: “Government and social control are in the hands of expert politicians who have power, instead of expert technologists who have wisdom. There should be technologists in control of every field of human need and desire” (Albert Wiggam’s 1923 *New Decalogue of Science*, cited in Ludmerer 1972, 16–17). Experts were necessary for the task of wise public administration, because the modern conditions of industrial capitalism no longer permitted a quaint liberal individualism, but demanded wise government by expert elites. The idea was that the benignly motivated experts should interpose themselves, in the name of the social good, to better represent the interests of the industrial poor, for whom many reformers felt contempt as much as pity.

Put in historical context, the appeal of eugenics to the progressive mind is clearer. Eugenics necessarily rejects individualism in favor of a collective—"the race" or the nation; eugenics regarded unfettered industrial capitalism as dysgenic, both because improved well-being thwarts natural Malthusian checks and because capitalism promotes the inferior, low-wage races; eugenics boasted an air of scientific authority, especially with its emphasis on statistical measurement; and eugenics opposed laissez-faire values, by substituting an objective, expert determination of the social good for a subjective, individual determination of the social good. Thus were eugenics and progressivism complementary rather than antagonistic trends.¹⁶

5. Why the Neglect of Eugenics in the History of American Economics?

There are several reasons why Progressive Era eugenics has been unduly neglected in the history of economics. First, "eugenics" remains a dirty word. The atrocities perpetrated by German National Socialism in the name of eugenics have not only tainted the term but have also so colored our view of eugenics that even professional historians have struggled not to indict by association the eugenic ideas of different times and places.¹⁷ Second, and related, contemporary scholarship sometimes inclines to apologize for the now unfashionable enthusiasms of revered ancestors, particularly those who do not fit the traditional profile of a eugenicist (Childs 2001). Third, trends in historical writing are often late in arriving to the history of economic thought. The contemporary understanding of the history of eugenics comes from a revisionist history-of-science literature that dates "only" to the 1980s and 1990s, and, what is more, this recent literature is itself mostly unacquainted with the history of political economy.

Without rejecting any of these hypotheses, the present essay investigates a complementary cause for the amnesia about the influence of eugenics upon the nascent social sciences of a century ago: Progressive Era eugenics is missing because, at least in part, Progressive Era eugenics has been mischaracterized. An influential strain of the era's historiography has tended to treat eugenics as the mere continuation (or more

16. This paragraph is indebted to Searle 1998, 25–26.

17. Daniel Kevles describes his early work as "coming to terms with a dirty word" (cited in Adams 1990, 226).

modern version) of social Darwinism, and it has, moreover, made “social Darwinism” a pejorative that refers to opponents of reform.

American historiography largely understands “social Darwinism” not as the influence of Darwinian ideas upon social science but as an indictment. Indeed, the indictment is so broadly written that even social Darwinism’s traditional exemplars, Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, are accused of views they did not hold.

The present essay argues that this influential strand of American historiography misleads with respect to the influence of Darwinian and other biological thought upon the Progressive Era sciences of society, this by treating eugenics as social Darwinism and by treating social Darwinism as a synecdoche for all ideological aspects of Gilded Age American capitalism that progressives are seen to oppose: individualism, laissez-faire economics, imperialism, racism, and militarism. Of the several consequences of this historiographical construct, one is that the influence of eugenics has been obscured. In what follows, I argue that neither social Darwinism nor eugenics are what this influential strand of historiography makes them out be.

5.1 A Social Darwinism

The biological and social sciences have been intellectual trading partners for at least two centuries. So, by itself, the notion that biological ideas might influence social science (or vice versa) is neither surprising nor intrinsically objectionable.

But many historians, especially since Richard Hofstadter’s influential *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), have tended to reconstruct “social Darwinism” as a bad thing, something that *is* objectionable. “Social Darwinism” is not understood as a description of Darwin’s ideas applied to society. It has devolved into an omnibus term of abuse, encompassing the full catalog of capitalist ideologies the progressives are seen to have opposed. In the United States, “social Darwinism” connotes the use of vaguely Darwinian ideas—as reduced to stock phrases such as “survival of the fittest” and the “struggle for existence”—to explain and justify a brutish laissez-faire capitalism of late-nineteenth-century America, and nearly always applies to laissez-faire scholars seen to oppose progressive-minded reform.¹⁸

18. This paragraph is indebted to Robert Bannister (1979), a leading revisionist critic of Hofstadter’s thesis.

There are, broadly, two problems with this influential construct, as several generations of revisionist historians have argued. The first problem is that those who wished to justify late-nineteenth-century *laissez-faire* rarely made recourse to Darwin. The second problem is that critics of the late-nineteenth-century social order, including the progressives who wished to reform it, *did* make recourse to Darwin and other biological sources, the progressive eugenicists being conspicuous among them. But because the progressives are seen to have opposed individualism, *laissez-faire*, and the other undesirable attributes American historiography has attached to the term *social Darwinism*, the influence of Darwinian and other biological ideas upon progressive social scientists has been underplayed in American Progressive Era historiography.

American plutocrats who used Darwin to defend the Gilded Age social order were, it turns out, scarcer than hen's teeth (Wylie 1959). Business apologists for *laissez-faire* more commonly invoked religion, Horatio Alger mythology, the American republican tradition, and even, if less frequently, classical political economy.¹⁹ Darwinian defenses of *laissez-faire* among scholars, who were more likely to have read Darwin, are not much easier to find. American historiography has made "social Darwinist" into such a broad indictment that even the paradigmatic social Darwinists, Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, fail to fit their standard historiographical profiles perfectly.

Spencer is certainly the historian's prototypical social Darwinian. He defended *laissez-faire* on evolutionary grounds, and his extraordinary intellectual prominence made him the personal embodiment of what came to be called social Darwinism.²⁰ Spencer's synthetic philosophy aspired to demonstrate that "social science is not to guide the conscious control of human evolution, . . . [because] such control is an absolute impossibility" (Hofstadter [1944] 1992, 43).

But Spencer would have rejected the label of "Darwinian," in part because his own theory of evolution predated (or at least was published

19. The historian R. J. Wilson (1967, 93) wrote: "It is true that in the last half of the 19th century great numbers of Americans were ideologically committed to the notions of competition, merited success and deserved failure. But it is not true that this commitment was grounded on Darwinian premises. No more than a small handful of American business leaders or intellectuals were 'social Darwinists' in any sense precise enough to have a useful meaning."

20. Both Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace regarded Spencer as the leading thinker of the late nineteenth century. Hofstadter ([1944] 1992, 33) says of the influence of Spencer: "In the three decades after the Civil War, it was impossible to be active in any field of intellectual work without mastering Spencer."

before) Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Spencer also opposed imperialism and militarism, and he resented the use of his phrase, "survival of the fittest," to justify imperial wars waged in the name of preserving the English race.²¹

Spencer was also not Darwinian with respect to biological inheritance. He was, in fact, a leading Lamarckian, so much so that reformers often found themselves in the awkward position of relying upon Spencer's defense of the idea that characteristics acquired during an individual's lifetime can be transmitted to progeny. Indeed, those who opposed Spencer's view of human inheritance were called neo-Darwinians (see section 5.3). Spencer's view was that, in the struggle for existence, self-improvement came from conscious, planned exertion, not from chance variation and natural selection. The biological case Spencer made for laissez-faire rested upon a kind of Lamarckian self-help and not upon Darwinian inheritance. In these important respects, "social Darwinist" is a misnomer even when applied to Spencer.

Sumner serves as the other paradigmatic social Darwinist in Hofstadter (as in many other accounts, such as Sidney Fine's *Laissez Faire and the General Welfare State* [1956]). A disciple of Spencer much more than of Darwin (at least with respect to human society), Sumner also does not completely fit his stock profile of social Darwinist and apologist for American capital (Bannister 1973). Sumner, for example, opposed the tariff, a hot-button apostasy that nearly cost him his academic position. Sumner was also a pacifist, and he openly criticized the American imperial adventure of the Spanish-American War, saying that "my patriotism is of the kind which is outraged by the notion that the United States was never a great nation until [this] . . . petty three months campaign" (Hofstadter [1944] 1992, 195). Sumner, in one of the essays taken to be a classic text of social Darwinism—"What Social Classes Owe to Each Other"—actually defended (open-shop) organized labor and argued that

21. As with John Stuart Mill, the passage of time has seemed to transform once radical ideas into conservative notions. Spencer was considered dangerously radical in the early post-bellum years. Toward the end of his life, Spencer became, for progressives, synonymous with the (Darwinian) defense of laissez-faire. But before the Progressive Era professionalization of American economics, Spencer's anticlerical and antideistic stances were quite controversial in American colleges, which were institutionally Christian, and where clerics taught political economy. This was especially true at conservative Yale, where Sumner's introduction into the curriculum of Spencer's *Study of Sociology* was opposed by the administration and which Sumner fought for on grounds of academic freedom (see Barber 1988, 147–51).

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collective bargaining would better serve labor's interests than would the statutory approach ultimately pursued by progressives.²²

Sumner was an advocate for laissez-faire, not for industry, and when industry benefited from policies opposed to laissez-faire, such as the tariff, Sumner was their enemy. The point here is obvious, but often lost in the stark dichotomies of Progressive Era historiography—not all departures from laissez-faire will serve the cause of progressive reform; indeed, they can work to entrench the status quo that reform seeks to change.

Virtually no Progressive Era scholar consistently described himself or herself as a “social Darwinist.” There certainly were no schools of social Darwinism. Though recognizably Darwinian ideas were widespread among Progressive Era social scientists, the term *social Darwinist* seems to have been an epithet from its inception. Though used occasionally by progressive critics of laissez-faire, social Darwinism was made popular and given its more expansive modern meaning by later historians who sympathetically chronicled the progressives' ideas. (Thus Hofstadter's book is concerned more with the progressive critics of social Darwinism than with its proponents.)

For our purposes, what matters is that this influential reading of social Darwinism has become multiply misleading. First, social Darwinism is not only a misnomer, even when applied to its putative paragons, it is also a red herring. Because the label was affixed most prominently to advocates of individualist capitalism, it wrongly implied that their opponents, the progressives, were themselves averse to Darwinian ideas. But the progressive critics of laissez-faire did not object to the use of Darwinian or other biological ideas in social science per se. On the contrary, they themselves routinely made recourse to biological explanations of social and economic phenomena and, arguably, did so more frequently and more intensively than did the scholars they called social Darwinists. What the progressives objected to was laissez-faire itself.

Second, Hofstadter identified other modes of social competition—imperialism and militarism, or competition at the racial (read: national)

22. The question of whether legislation or collective bargaining would better advance the interests of labor divided the progressives from organized labor. Some progressives close to organized labor, such as John R. Commons, were ambivalent. Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labor, came to believe that organized labor would do better with collective bargaining and became an adversary rather than an ally of the progressive economists who advocated statutory approaches to labor reform. After their falling-out, Gompers derisively referred to the economists' AALL as the American Association for the Assassination of Labor.

level—that he also called “social Darwinism.” It is not just that the paradigmatic social Darwinians, Spencer and Sumner, do not deserve the imperialist or militarist labels, or that some progressive reformers, such as Theodore Roosevelt and Karl Pearson, do. By using the same term to describe different phenomena—economic competition among individuals and political competition among races—Hofstadter added more semantic freight to an already overburdened term, pushing toward its current meaning as a pejorative that signals opposition to reform.

Third, and related, Hofstadter ([1944] 1992, 161) sowed further confusion by treating eugenics—what he called “the most enduring aspect of social Darwinism”—as a mere continuation of social Darwinism. Many other historians have followed suit. But not only are eugenics and social Darwinism more different than they are alike, the historiographical association of eugenics with individualism and laissez-faire has obscured the appeal of eugenics to some progressives, thereby helping promote the neglect of eugenics in Progressive Era historiography.

Hofstadter’s categories sometimes blind him to the eugenic enthusiasms of reformers, such as the progressive economist-turned-sociologist Edward A. Ross. A mere four pages before acknowledging that the early eugenicists’ “biological data . . . were convincing to men like E. A. Ross, who had thoroughly repudiated Spencerian individualism,” Hofstadter had claimed that “Ross refused to look upon the poor as unfit or to worship at the shrine of the fittest” (164, 160). Because Hofstadter (wrongly) categorizes eugenic thought with Spencerian individualism, he has difficulty placing Ross. Ross was a notable progressive, who opposed Spencerian individualism, but he also pioneered the race-suicide argument in economics, a view *premised* on the claim that some groups among the poor are unfit.

5.2 Darwinism

Biological theorizing about human variation (of race, of sex, of social position) had a long history in the nineteenth century. Scientific racism, for example, long precedes the modern flowering of eugenic thought circa 1890; it also antedates Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. But with the advent of the ethically and empirically minded social sciences of the Progressive Era (and with the expansion of social welfare legislation), existing theories of human variation were deployed with a new-found impetus in the social scientific task of determining the root causes

of criminalism, poverty, alcoholism, prostitution, and other social and economic pathologies regarded as biologically heritable (Stepan 1986).

As with other intellectuals, progressives mined Darwinian ideas for their various purposes. Darwin could appeal to a wide range of social scientists because the Darwinism of a century ago was so protean—it was able to accommodate quite different attitudes toward social reform. Whether Darwin was influential because of what he said, or in spite of what he said, is a difficult problem in intellectual history, but it is clear that there was something in Darwin for nearly everyone.²³ As the historian Leslie Jones (1998, 7) puts it: “Individualism and socialism, militarism and pacifism, pro-natalism and neo-Malthusianism, organised religion and agnosticism, all have had their Darwinian exegetes.” Faithful to Darwin or not, a great range of Progressive Era social scientists worked in a recognizably Darwinian idiom, also importing other biological ideas.

Darwinism has never been more influential than it is today, 145 years since the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Darwin had worked out his theories twenty years earlier, but, as an establishment figure, he feared his social standing would not withstand publication of them. Darwin also understood the importance of priority to scientific reputation, however. Upon reading a paper by Alfred Russel Wallace, a then obscure naturalist, that independently proposed the theory of evolution by natural selection, Darwin was moved to hasty publication—his introduction calls *On the Origin of Species* an “abstract.” Darwin orchestrated, without Wallace’s knowledge, the unveiling of both men’s work at the same meeting (Raby 2001). While Wallace is sometimes granted codiscoverer credit, it is Darwinism, not Wallacism, that inspires and exercises contemporary scholars.

Darwin and Darwinism start with only two fundamental premises. First, heritable changes occur randomly in individual organisms. Second, some of these changes offer individuals greater fitness than their peers, that is, offer, via natural selection, a greater chance of survival and reproduction. If both premises are true, the population to which the individuals belong will *necessarily* evolve, that is, the population will develop a greater proportion of fitter (with respect to a given environment)

23. The Darwin scholar Morse Peckham (1959, 32) put the question this way: “Is it true that what Darwin said had very little impact, but that what people thought he said, that is, what they already believed and believed to have been confirmed by Darwin, had enormous impact?” This question is still vital and contentious in the Darwin industry.

traits. Darwin never knew what changed or how it was inherited or what caused its changes. He is said to have died with Gregor Mendel's genetics reprint in his library, its pages still uncut. Modern Darwinians know that phenotypes (organisms and their behaviors) are influenced by their genes (collectively, the genotype), and that it is the genotype that changes—via genetic mutation and recombination from sexual reproduction.²⁴

But the modern understanding of Darwinism is the product of the evolutionary synthesis begun in the 1930s and 1940s, wherein Darwin's leading idea, natural selection, was joined to the theory of population genetics. Progressive Era biology had no established consensus on matters that are (mostly) settled today. Indeed, genetics and Darwinism, today regarded as inextricably bound together into the modern theory of evolution, were in mostly separate evolutionary camps one hundred years ago.

Progressive Era Darwinism (and sometimes Darwin himself) was ambiguous on aspects of human inheritance that were significant for newly professionalizing social scientists looking to ground their economic and social analyses in biology: particularly on (1) whether the individual or the group is the unit of selection, and (2) whether the environment can affect heredity. These fundamental ambiguities, when added to other unresolved matters in evolutionary thought—(3) whether competition is good or bad, (4) whether fitness consists solely in reproductive success, and (5) whether nature or the state should select the fittest—made Progressive Era biology very accommodating. Social scientists with quite different, even opposed, ideologies could join the project of explaining human variation by recourse to biology because the ambiguity of Progressive Era evolutionary thought, unlike modern Darwinism, could provide support for quite different views of reform.

5.3 Nature or Nurture:

What Human Traits Can Be Inherited?

No eugenicist doubted that social and economic pathologies were the product of heredity. The question was whether heredity could be influenced by environmental factors. Reformers especially, well into the 1930s, emphasized environmental effects upon heredity, in the Lamarckian tradition. They believed that characteristics parents acquired during

24. The preceding two paragraphs borrow from Leonard 2003b, 350.

a lifetime could be transmitted to progeny. The drinking of an alcoholic father could, for example, poison his “germ plasm,” so that his offspring inherited the affliction. It is not that bad habits acquired during a lifetime are imitated by progeny but that bad habits are genetically (to speak anachronistically) inherited by progeny.

A Lamarckian eugenics was thus possible: improvement of bad homes could also improve bad blood. Indeed, “euthenics” was briefly in use as a neo-Lamarckian term of art describing eugenic improvement through environmental means.²⁵ Some of the earliest eugenics tracts tended to be Lamarckian in orientation. Richard Dugdale’s (1877) famous *The “Jukes”: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity*, which considered the family history of a “degenerate” Anglo-Saxon clan, argued that the clan’s misfortune was, in part, the product of their degraded environment.

The Lamarckians were opposed by the neo-Darwinians, who argued that human heredity was unaffected by environment.²⁶ And importantly, Darwin himself was, upon occasion, Lamarckian in his views, especially in *The Descent of Man*. “Habits . . . followed during many generations,” wrote Darwin, “probably tend to be inherited” (cited in Degler 1991, 352 n. 29). Thus could Lamarckians find some comfort in Darwin—nurture could affect nature.

The German biologist August Weismann’s watershed finding in 1889—that mice with their tails cut off do not bear short-tailed progeny—was seen by many as a refutation of Lamarckism. Some neo-Darwinian eugenicists read Weismann’s result as a crucial experiment, conclusive proof that the germ plasm of bad heredity was beyond the reach of environmental reform. Other eugenicists were more cautious. Leonard Darwin, a leader of English eugenics for some years, saw eugenics not as a substitute for ordinary social improvement but as a means of defining the useful limits of environmental social reform (Searle 1976, 47–48).

Karl Pearson and his Galton Laboratory for National Eugenics colleagues were agnostic in principle but hereditarian in practice: “We have

25. “Euthenics” appears to have been coined by Ellen H. (Swallow) Richards, the author of *Euthenics: The Science of Controllable Environment, A Plea for Better Living Conditions as a First Step toward Higher Human Efficiency*, and a founder of home economics; the term *home economics* eventually won out over Richard’s preferred label of *human ecology*.

26. Environmental factors can clearly affect phenotypes, as with malnutrition or a broken bone. The question with respect to heredity is whether such changes are transmitted to the genotype. Darwinians argue that environmental changes cannot affect inheritance, barring an environmentally caused change in the genotype, as might be caused, for example, by radiation.

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placed our money on environment,” said Pearson, “when Heredity wins in a canter” (Searle 1976, 47–48).²⁷ When in 1909, Pearson published a manifesto, “bricks for the foundation” of eugenic science, he announced that “the relative weight of nature and nurture must not a priori be assumed but must be scientifically measured; and thus far our experience is that nature dominates nurture, that inheritance is more vital than environment. . . . there exists no demonstrable inheritance of acquired characters. Environment modifies the bodily character of the existing generation, but does not modify the germ plasms from which the next generation springs” (1909, 19–20).

Progressive Lamarckians, like Lester Ward, an American sociologist with training in paleontology, took Weismann’s results badly. Ward (1891) thought that if Weismann were right—if acquired characteristics cannot be transmitted to progeny—then social reform would be ineffectual. Environmental improvement could be, at best, a temporary palliative, but it could not affect heredity, which he saw as the source of economic and social pathology. Thus did Ward find himself supporting Herbert Spencer—a man whose individualism and laissez-faire economics Ward, like other progressives, loathed—because it was Spencer who led the Lamarckian reply to Weismann’s neo-Darwinism.

Other eugenic reformers, such as Wallace and the American economist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, were more sanguine than Ward. They perceived that marriage and mating were important for eugenics and that social reform influencing marriage could therefore have beneficial eugenic effects. The humane Wallace was a reformer but also a stout defender of neo-Darwinian inheritance. Wallace believed that English society was increasingly dysgenic, but he rejected compulsory eugenics as elitist and barbarous, arguing that eugenic ends could better be realized by an expansion of women’s education and their political and economic freedom, which would reduce women’s economic dependency and thereby reduce the incentive for women to make dysgenic marriages (Leonard 2005).²⁸

27. When Edith Elderton’s research at the Galton Laboratory claimed that the progeny of alcoholic parents did not inherit their parents’ affliction, it was vigorously contested by temperance advocates, such as Alfred Marshall, and by Lamarckian eugenicists, like John Maynard Keynes (Childs 2001, 25).

28. “Progress is still possible, nay, is certain,” said Wallace (1892, 156), “by . . . that mode of selection which will inevitably come into action through the ever-increasing freedom, joined with the higher education of women.” Wallace (1890, 335) envisioned selection as “effected through the agency of female choice in marriage,” leaving “the improvement of the race to the cultivated minds and pure instincts of the Woman of the Future” (337). See also Leonard 2005, 26.

Gilman's *sui generis* feminist eugenics, what she called "Humaniculture," envisions women as the enlightened society's eugenic agents. Women have a twofold role: they select fitter men for marriage, and they collectively supervise the raising of fitter children. Women select fitter mates with the help of state certification of men's biological fitness. Males are required to be eugenically certified, so that women have better information when selecting a mate and thus are less likely to make a dysgenic match. Gilman also envisioned that all parenting would be given over to a cadre of professionally trained women, what she called "social parentage" (Leonard 2005).²⁹ On this view, social reform could realize eugenic ends, without invoking "pollution of the germ plasm."

Modern evolutionary biology rejects Lamarckian and other non-Darwinian theories of inheritance. Progressive Era Darwinism could, in contrast, still accommodate a Lamarckian view of inheritance, which offered support to the reform variant of eugenics. The modern view, which sees reformers as partisans of nurture, is belied in the Progressive Era by reformers like Pearson and Wallace, who were staunch proponents of Darwinian inheritance. Similarly, the modern association of *laissez-faire* with nature is belied by Herbert Spencer, who was a Lamarckian, a vigorous disputant of Weismann and the other neo-Darwinians.

The points are two: first, the modern nature-versus-nurture dichotomy does not map well upon the Progressive Era's *laissez-faire*-versus-reform dichotomy. Reformers can be found among proponents of Darwinian inheritance (nature) and Lamarckian inheritance (nurture) alike. Today, a eugenicist is invariably Darwinian with respect to inheritance (as are all students of human inheritance). But a century ago, the Lamarckian view of inheritance allowed proponents of ordinary environmental reform to be eugenicists, and many were. Second, and related, whatever one's commitments with respect to the effect of environment upon heredity, he or she could find some support in Progressive Era theories of evolution.

5.4 Unit of Selection: Individual or Group?

Among those who applied biological ideas to social problems, one's stance on the unit of selection better predicted one's view toward reform.

29. These ideas are expressed most compactly in Gilman 1900. "Humaniculture" echoes earlier terminology for eugenics, such as "stirpiculture" and "viriculture." Gilman was a Lamarckian eugenicist; she argued that better (social) parenting could improve the genetic prospects of children born to the unfit (Leonard 2005, 20 n. 28).

Those who thought in terms of collectives or groups, such as Ward, Wallace, and Pearson, were better disposed to reform than were individualists like Spencer. And since eugenics is the species of reform concerned with the collective called “race,” eugenics ought to have appealed more to collectivists than to individualists.

Ernst Mayr (1986, 358), dean of American evolutionary biology, has argued that “for most evolutionists, from Darwin on, the individual as a whole, is the principal target of selection.” The qualifiers “most” and “principal” are important, for Darwin himself allowed, in places, that human beings, whom he regarded as subject to natural selection, would assist other members of the group in ways that were altruistic—that is, in ways that did not promote (and may even adversely affect) their individual chances of survival and reproduction. Darwin ([1871] 1913, 136) referred to human sympathy for the less fortunate as “the noblest part of our nature.”³⁰ Darwin allowed that species compete with one another to some extent, though he also believed, most clearly for nonhuman animals, that competition among individuals within a species was more intensive and more important for evolution by natural selection.

The question of whether individuals or groups compete clearly mattered for those who would use Darwinian ideas about competition in nature to support or to criticize economic competition (see below). Reformers employing Darwinian ideas could not avoid competition, but they could avert to group rather than individual competition and still be plausibly Darwinian. Most reformers, and certainly the eugenicists among them, saw races and economic classes as the competing groups relevant for selection. Pearson, for example, regarded the English race as an “organized whole”; the idea that races (read: nations) compete is what makes Pearson a *national* socialist and explains why he supported England’s imperial wars (1905, 46). We can represent the views of inheritance and the views of the principal unit of selection as a simple matrix. See table 1.

Without yet considering the other unsettled aspects of Progressive Era theories of evolution, we already can see, with only two dimensions, a heterogeneity of views that do not comfortably fit into the Hofstadterian taxonomy and that are, likewise, obscured when viewed through the lenses of modern Darwinism.

30. Modern Darwinism conceives of altruism from the gene’s-eye view. An individual may sacrifice itself if that increases the likelihood—by saving kin, those carrying a fraction of the same genes—of the genes surviving, albeit in different phenotypic hosts.

Table 1 Representative Evolutionary Theorists, by Theory of Inheritance and Unit of Selection

Unit of Selection	Inheritance	
	Lamarckian	Neo-Darwinian
Individual	H. Spencer	A. Weismann
Collective	L. Ward	K. Pearson, A. Wallace

5.5 Competing Senses of “Competition”

A third ambiguity of Progressive Era Darwinism concerns what was meant by “competition” and the extent to which competition in nature made an appropriate metaphor for economic competition. Darwin, who insisted upon the descent of man from the “lower” orders of animals, was sometimes read as implying that, thereby, human behavior is animalistic, brutish. On this reading, competition among human beings is akin to competition among animals in nature: the key phrases here are “survival of the fittest” in “the struggle for existence.”³¹ Both phrases invoked a vision of competition as nature-red-in-tooth-and-claw, an image that provided a vivid critique of the economic competition of the new, raw industrial capitalism. On this account, economic competition is violent, uncooperative, and destructive, implying that nature is a threat, something terrifying to be overcome.

There are two difficulties here. The first is that natural selection can select for cooperative behavior—it in no way entails tooth-and-claw conflict. That cooperative behavior can be adaptive is a commonplace of contemporary evolutionary biology, and it was also known to Progressive Era intellectuals. Petr Kropotkin, a Russian anarchist, made this very argument in his *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902), where he set out to show how cooperative behavior could be the product of Darwinian natural selection, instancing the social insects and many other examples of cooperation in nature. Kropotkin did not reject Darwin; on the contrary, he found in Darwin’s natural selection cooperation rather than competition of the tooth-and-claw variety.

The second difficulty pertains to the ambiguous nature of “competition” in the economic sense. Some Progressive Era economists, particularly those who subscribed to both marginal utility and marginal

31. “Survival of the fittest” is Spencer’s phrase; Darwin makes use of it only in the fifth edition of *Origin of Species*. “The struggle for existence” is due to Malthus.

productivity theories, saw economic competition not as destructive conflict but as socially valuable fair play. John Bates Clark, for example, meant by “competition” the refereed rivalry among firms to serve consumers. Clark saw competition as productive and technologically innovative, something policy should promote, whereas progressives saw competition as destructive, something policy should restrain.³² In Clark’s account, unfair economic behavior—such as predatory pricing or exclusive contracting by monopolists—is *anti*-competitive, a departure from fair play and a justification for regulatory intervention.

These competing conceptions of economic competition are virtually opposed: Clark’s neoclassical view regards competition as fair play and departures from it as something to be policed, whereas the progressives regarded competition as amoral and destructive—sometimes invoking tooth-and-claw imagery—and departures from it as something to be promoted.

Progressive Era firms did not seek or lobby for competition in Clark’s sense. To the contrary, they did all they could to undermine Clarkian competition: they combined in the hope of acquiring monopoly pricing power; they sometimes employed (what antitrust law still calls) anticompetitive practices such as predation and exclusion; and they used political influence to promote and sustain the high tariff that protected them from import competition.

Critics and proponents of reform could thus have entirely different conceptions of economic competition, and both find some support in Darwinism. Progressive critics of laissez-faire could invoke the tooth-and-claw version of Darwin, while neoclassicals like Clark, who, while not laissez-faire, had a more benign view of competitive markets, could appeal to the harmonious, cooperative vision of nature also found in Progressive Era Darwinism.

Thus these very different views of competition in nature—model to be emulated or threat to be overcome—and their implications for economic competition were both plausibly Darwinian. What is more, the progressives’ views of natural selection helps us to distinguish social Darwinism, which is modeled on natural selection, from eugenics, which is premised on the failure of natural selection.

32. “Competition” had many different and sometimes conflicting meanings in the Progressive Era. Clark himself used the term in at least four different ways (Leonard 2003c, 539–40). See also Morgan 1993.

5.6 What Is Fitness?

In his influential *The Promise of American Life*, Herbert Croly of the *New Republic* put his case for a vigorous national government in eugenic language, arguing that artificial selection, by which he meant state-guided reform, was superior to natural selection (read: laissez-faire). The state, said Croly (1909, 191), had a responsibility to “interfere on behalf of the really fittest.”

Croly required the qualifier “really” because, on the Darwinian account, the fittest are those with greatest reproductive success. For Darwinians, interference with natural selection risks impeding its benefits. “Survival of the unfittest,” a phrase attributed to the economics writer W. R. Greg (1868), is thus a contradiction in Darwinian terms. So, when the race-suicide eugenicists proposed that persons of inferior stock were outcompeting their biological betters, they were not making a Darwinian argument, and, in this respect, as in others, the label of Darwinian misleads.³³

Darwinism calls fit those who have most successfully reproduced, an *ex post* judgment. Eugenicists, on the other hand, tended to regard fitness as a moral or racial attribute, something judged *ex ante*. The social control of human breeding, after all, could not succeed without a prior judgment as to who (that is, which groups) was biologically superior. Indeed, many race-suicide accounts, such as that of Francis Amasa Walker’s, argued that the better class of person, by virtue of greater racial refinement, refused to have an adequate number of offspring, allowing the inferior races to outbreed them (Leonard 2003a). Not surprisingly, the eugenicists’ biological hierarchy mapped rather well onto traditional prejudices. Races with lower socioeconomic rank routinely found themselves assigned to biological inferiority, their greater relative fecundity notwithstanding.

It is of course true that natural selection could also be—and was—used to explain and justify putative racial hierarchies. The point here is that many eugenicists were non-Darwinian with respect to the nature of fitness. Where Darwinism saw fitness as the outcome of a selection process, eugenics made fitness the basis for initiating a selection process.

33. Two caveats need to be issued here. First, I do not wish to imply opposition between Darwin and Greg, whom Darwin admired. Second, Darwin’s worry about the dysgenic effects of law and custom is not limited to reform legislation or charity intended to help the poor. Darwin also warned of the dysgenic effects of primogeniture in *Descent*, saying that it promoted the survival of feeble-minded older sons of the aristocracy (Soloway 1990, 74).

It is no surprise, then, that many promoted eugenics precisely because they believed that natural selection had failed.

5.7 Who Should Select the Fittest:

Nature or the State?

Because it was Spencer's coinage, "survival of the fittest" is ordinarily associated with laissez-faire and with biological defenses of laissez-faire. But it is a mistake to identify selectionist sentiment with laissez-faire. The progressive opponents of laissez-faire were also often advocates of survival of the fittest, albeit with a non-Darwinian conception of fitness. What distinguished the progressives' views was their belief that the state, as guided by expert science, could do better than nature in the essential task of weeding out the unfit. The progressives did not reject selection, they rejected *natural* selection.

Laissez-faire theorists who also subscribed to the idea of race degeneration could only argue that ordinary social reform was impeding natural selection and that nature should be allowed to do its job unimpeded by dysgenic social reform. Eugenacists, certainly the progressives among them, typically were skeptical toward natural selection. Some argued that natural selection did not apply to humans. Others, notably the race-suicide theorists—Francis Amasa Walker, Frank Fetter, Edward A. Ross, Sidney Webb, among them—believed that natural selection had ceased to function with the development of industrial capitalism and its higher living standards for the working classes (Leonard 2003a). Still others, such as Lester Ward, believed that natural selection, to the extent it functioned at all, was inefficient. For Ward, nature was profligate and wasteful, so society should not imitate nature but, rather, improve upon it. Thus could Ward promote eugenics, having made his career by attacking social Darwinism.

Eugenics (artificial selection) can be seen as analogous to selection in nature, the similarity that Hofstadter emphasized in presenting eugenics as a continuation of social Darwinism. But, historically, the case actually made for Progressive Era eugenics rarely invoked this analogy, and, in fact, proponents often argued for eugenics on grounds that natural selection did not obtain or, if it did, was undesirable.

So though eugenics and social Darwinism (natural selection) both applied biological ideas to social phenomena, eugenics, by arguing that the course of human evolution must be socially controlled by expert technocrats, offered a vision exactly opposed to Spencer's. The question of

whether the state should select the fittest fundamentally divided *laissez-faire* advocates of survival of the fittest—who argued, “no”—from the eugenicists, who insisted, “yes.”³⁴ It is no accident that, historiographically mislabeling to one side, progressives were drawn to the ranks of eugenics advocacy but cannot be found among social Darwinists.

Among its other problems, the historiography that regards eugenics as a mere continuation of social Darwinism elides what is a most salient division in Progressive Era social thought: the division between the reformers who advocated a more expansive role for the state in society and the economy, and their critics who opposed it.

6. Conclusion

“Social Darwinist” and “eugenicist” today function essentially as epithets. It is understandable, perhaps predictable, that reform-minded historians would not seek to apply the terms to their intellectual progenitors.³⁵ But the same strand of Progressive Era historiography that has made “social Darwinism” into an epithet has also worked to mislead with respect to the influence of biological thought upon the newly professionalizing sciences of society. It has done so by also fashioning “social Darwinism” into a synecdoche for all things deemed nonprogressive in retrospect, which wrongly attributes to exemplars like Spencer and Sumner views they did not hold; which wrongly implies that progressives were somehow averse to Darwinian and other biological thought, when the opposite is true; and which also misleads with respect to the biological influences upon *laissez-faire* thought, which were, at least in part, Lamarckian rather than Darwinian.

These misunderstandings are compounded by the misleading claim that eugenics should be seen as a mere continuation of social Darwinism. Many eugenicists were reformers, thus opposed to *laissez-faire*, and

34. Of course, intellectual inconsistency did not stop some professed individualists from endorsing state control of human breeding. Sidney Webb (1910–11, 237), an enthusiastic eugenicist, understood this: “No consistent eugenicist can be a ‘Laissez Faire’ individualist unless he throws up the game in despair. He must interfere, interfere, interfere!”

35. The use of these terms as referents for all Progressive Era ideologies deemed nonprogressive in retrospect is of a piece with a Whiggishness that is sometimes found in Progressive Era historiography more generally. Progressive Era histories are often Whiggish in Herbert Butterfield’s (1931) original sense of the term, that is, they depict their subject as a gradual march of progress, where good, forward-looking reformers continuously struggle with and ultimately overcome bad, backward-looking conservatives (Mayr 1990, 301).

many eugenicists were more Lamarckian than Darwinian with respect to inheritance. What is more, Progressive Era eugenics had a view of biological fitness wholly opposed to the Darwinian conception of fitness. And the eugenicist's case for state control of human breeding did not endorse natural selection; on the contrary, it ordinarily was predicated on a belief that natural selection did not or could not work. These important differences help explain why progressives were drawn to eugenics but not to social Darwinism.

The influence of biological thought should be no surprise, since Darwinian and other biological ideas influenced many aspects of the newly professionalizing social sciences. Social scientists of radically different outlooks could and did appeal to the biological thought of the day, this because Progressive Era biology (including Darwinism) was so protean, thus accommodating, with respect to the unit of selection, the effect of environment upon heredity, the effect of competition, and the nature of fitness. If one were to label as "social Darwinist" any social scientist who used a recognizably Darwinian idea, then nearly all Progressive Era social scientists—proponents and critics of reform alike—would be social Darwinists.

But because the term *social Darwinism* is associated with opposition to reform, it is important to recognize that, though modern Darwinism would no longer permit it, the eclecticism of Progressive Era biology readily accommodated a reform eugenics, which regarded the collective (race) as the unit of selection, which assumed that the environment could affect heredity—so that improving bad homes could also improve bad blood—and which saw biological fitness as racial, something prior to relative reproductive success.

In making Hofstadter a foil, I do not wish to be unfair, only to acknowledge his great influence. Hofstadter, after all, was not the first to critically join laissez-faire to Darwinism (and Darwinism to eugenics). The Hofstadter-inspired historiography, which presents Darwinian natural selection as the scientific instantiation (or expression or embodiment) of laissez-faire capitalism and which regards eugenics as so much social Darwinism, has deep intellectual roots in Left criticism of capitalism.³⁶ And, neither, of course, is Hofstadter alone. Other historians have

36. Engels read Darwinian natural selection as a mere projection of competitive Malthusian political economy upon nature and saw Galton's eugenics as the mere projection of Darwin back upon society. Historians and biologists on the Left have continued this venerable line of argument. One important problem with the claim that natural selection is just warmed-over

worked in this historiographical vein. But Hofstadter's telling—which reads eugenics as social Darwinism and social Darwinism as benighted opposition to reform—stands out because it has become canonical. It has influenced the process by which technical terms in intellectual history have devolved into epithets, a process that has, among the several consequences identified here, produced a kind of historical amnesia about the influence of biological ideas, notably eugenics, upon the reform thought and legislation that is the hallmark of the Progressive Era.

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liberal political economy is that, as William Coleman (2001, 39) has persuasively argued, the cofounder of natural selection, Alfred R. Wallace, was a socialist who wrote on political economy and who actively opposed competition, free trade, usury, and exports; who championed minimum wages, land nationalization, free bread for the indigent; and who argued that “capital” was “the enemy and tyrant of labour.”

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